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The Walk:

holding space in the face of crisis, failure, and fear

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by

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Abstract

The Walk:

holding space in the face of crisis, failure, and fear

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This thesis is about fear, failure, and faith. The tools I have developed during my graduate study have enabled me first to tolerate and then to welcome the energy of these forces into my artistic process. By examining and establishing Structure, creating and empowering Ensembles, and insisting upon an Inquiry-driven process, I can encounter fear and failure as I seek out the unpredictable, unrepeatable transcendence of the living play. By cultivating and inviting uncertainty, I hold space for the emergence of grace.

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Beginning: Fear, Failure, and Faith

Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. ***Don't be afraid.***

– Frederick Buechner

Artists are individuals willing to articulate in the face of flux and transformation. ... The artist becomes the creator of the future through ***the violent act of articulation****. I say violent because articulation is a forceful act. It demands an aggressiveness and an ability to enter into the fray and translate that experience into expression. In the articulation begins a new organization of the inherited landscape. …* ***To be silent, to avoid the violence of articulation alleviates the risk of failure but at the same time there is also no possibility of advancement****.*

– Anne Bogart

You cannot be a man of faith unless you know how to doubt. ... Faith is not blind conformity to a prejudice – a "pre-judgment." It is a decision, a judgment that is fully and deliberately taken in the light of a truth that cannot be proven. It is not merely the acceptance of a decision that has been made by somebody else. .... True faith is never merely a source of spiritual comfort. ***It may indeed bring peace, but before it does so it must involve us in a struggle****.*

– Thomas Merton

Two days before first rehearsal, it hit me that *Enter A Woman, Pretty Enough* would be my last production as an MFA student at UT. Immediately, the pressure of my own expectations began to loom. I convinced myself that our first day, especially my director's charge – the speech that rallies the team and sets our course for the work to come – had to be *perfect*. I had to ace this in order prove that my professors', mentors', and collaborators' faith in me hadn't been misplaced. I needed to show that, after three years of study, I could confidently lead the kind of process I believe in – one that is

rigorous, curious, and creates a safe and energizing home from which adventurous work can grow.

The day before first rehearsal, I started to panic. If I could just get my other tasks – assignments, grading, scheduling, logistics – taken care of, I would have the space of time and mind to write the perfect charge. I had been working with MFA playwright Diana Small on this project for almost two years – but rather than breeding confidence in my understanding of the heart of the play, the weight of that time paralyzed me. With the script still undergoing seismic shifts, the play was a moving target. Any ground in which I planted a flag could slide into the ocean in the next draft, but I told myself that regardless of the revisions that were still forthcoming, by this point I should have a much better grasp of how to set our course. What was wrong with me that, after all this time, the charge wasn't already in my head?

The day of first rehearsal, panic turned to terror. As I frantically worked on my speech, starting and scrapping my words again and again, all the disappointment born of previous first rehearsals flashed before my eyes. The minutes raced toward 6:30pm. I arrived at rehearsal later than I had planned – too late to ensure the room was arranged the way I wanted, as early actors were already filing in and finding their chairs. Faced with a roomful of eager undergrads, and following a beautiful speech from Diana about the origins of the play, my charge – fragments of the many drafts I had started and discarded – bombed. *I* utterly and completely bombed. As I watched the faces of my actors glaze, I felt my face flush red and my sweaty hands grasp for an ending, any ending, that could take the focus off of me and my surging shame.

I was embarrassed and overwhelmed. I was sure that Diana had lost her faith in me and that the actors would never trust me now that I had exposed myself as an ill-prepared monster. Surely, I was about to take a play that I loved and to which I had

already dedicated so much time and run it, just like my charge, straight into the ground in a Hindenberg-ian blaze of incompetence.

That night, I went home and cried to my husband, Jamie. I should just quit, I said, because *this* really was the show where everyone would discover that I am a wretched fraud. Everyone who believes in me has made a mistake. I didn't believe him when he said that these were fears that had surfaced at the beginning of every process since he'd known me. The thought that this was part of a pattern was ridiculous: this experience was unique in its horror. Jamie suggested that I write everything down so I could capture and investigate this frustration while it was still fresh. I thought that was absurd. I wanted to be comforted and absolved, not *reflective*. Finally, thinking I'd prove how totally wrong he was, I opened my computer and started to type.

I typed my way back in time, not just to earlier that night, but to the days and weeks leading up to first rehearsal. What had kept me from feeling prepared? What had scared me so badly? What could have helped? Forcing myself to more calmly analyze the sequence of events that led to the disastrous charge let me see them and the pattern they were part of for the first time. My own expectation of perfection and my fear of failing in this one last attempt kept me from taking the steps to slow down and actually prepare. I thought about the core points I could have talked over with Diana to mitigate the anxiety of starting a process knowing that significant changes were on their way. Before I knew it, the seemingly unbearable shame I had been feeling all night dissipated. Soon, I rediscovered energy and enthusiasm for the project that I thought had gone down with the ship of my rehearsal. I started typing about what would come next rather than what had just happened. It turned out I *did* have opinions about how to use the massive ensemble of actors I'd cast, how I wanted to draft the first staging of the play, how I could move forward from here. I typed and typed until early in the morning, encountering my failure

head on for the first time. Rather than let the force of it shove me back, I pushed myself forward and beyond the fear that failure had provoked.

Later that week, as I prepared to teach my Fundamentals of Directing class, I was frustrated with the reading I had assigned. It felt insufficient, thin, and dispassionate. As I re-read the passages about analysis and preparation, I realized there was no mechanism in the given process for ensuring that work was purpose-driven, answering not only questions about *what* was being made and *how*, but *why* it was worth making in the first place. As I continued to prepare, I articulated for myself the mechanisms I use to find the "why" in each play I make. In class, I wrote WHERE, WHEN, WHAT, WHY, HOW, WHO on the chalkboard and began showing my students how asking these questions creates an energy system that uses craft to clarify purpose while establishing analytical rigor. I realized in the middle of teaching that I was speaking passionately, fluidly, and without my notes. This strange sensation was something I had been trying to do all year: I was putting myself in the center of my work and using craft as a set of flexible tools rather than immutable rules. This journalistic breakdown wasn't someone else's theory I was working to convey. I was not afraid of what my students would think of it, because I believe that putting purpose at the center of process is essential. My confidence in these convictions was enough to glimpse a life on the other side of fear. Though I was beginning to see past it, I had not yet realized how big a role fear had played in my journey to Texas in the first place.

In the personal statement I sent to UT, my desire for graduate school was all about building craft. If I came back to school, I thought, I would learn the proper, professional way to make theatre instead of the catch as catch can methods I was picking up on the job leading a small Chicago theatre company. I wanted to banish the increasing uncertainty I felt in the rehearsal room. I was sure that building a stronger toolbox meant I would never

have to feel lost again. I wanted to erase any space in my process left up to chance. I wanted a better methodology of preparation, more precise language to use with my collaborators, better methods of text analysis, a stronger sense of directorial vision and how to communicate that vision across disciplines and taste. I wanted my work to be perfect, flawless, and beyond reproach. In retrospect, what I really wanted was assurance that I would never fail again. I wanted to stop being so damn afraid.

Acknowledging failure and fear is not the same as overcoming either. Simply telling myself to be brave will not make self-assurance blossom. Thankfully, over the course of the last three years, tools have emerged that help me to mitigate my fear, learn from my failure, and renew the faith in a theatrical process that feeds me. In these pages, I'll explore how Structure, Ensemble, and Inquiry are the essential elements of craft that help me find the energy in fear and failure, giving my voice and the theatrical event I'm working to create the space to emerge.

Context: Essential Plays and People

This thesis will primarily address a few key productions. UTNT – our annual showcase of 3rd year MFA playwrights' work – has been central to my growth, and I am proud to have worked in that festival three years running. In my first year, I directed a workshop production of Gabrielle Reisman's *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens*. Gabby's play – set on a farm in Iowa and populated with talking animals, mischievous figurines, and desperate Middle Americans – delighted and intimidated me from the start.

Playwright David Turkel and scenic designer William Anderson co-created the script for *'ratio*, my second UTNT venture. Picking up where *Hamlet* leaves off, David and Bill experimented with co-authorship between written narrative and visual art, treating both as text. They combined images and words in an art script that was both a blueprint for and an artwork independent from the piece created on stage. I led a workshop in the fall and presented an enhanced reading in our spring showcase in my second year. In both cases, I created a physical text by putting the words and images on actors' bodies to feed the still-developing art script. This project challenged me to work with a specificity and aggressiveness of physicality that I hadn't explored before. I worked quickly, impulsively, and with a truly experimental spirit.

Lyla School by my cohort-mate Brian Kettler was a short-process workshop production within UTNT at the end of the fall semester of my third year. The play centers on the reunion of Ahmed and Mary, students at a private arts-based school in New England, on the 20th anniversary of the tragic event that only the two of them survived. The quickness of this process was an excellent opportunity for me to practice clarity and concision with both my own discovery of the play and my work with the actors. There was no time to gently float toward the production, and this pressure of time was a necessary crucible to test the skills I'd been building.

In the fall of my second year, I began working with another classmate, Diana Small, on *Enter A Woman, Pretty Enough*. Dramaturgical explorations of this play in and beyond classes with Diana have been a central part of my time at UT, culminating in a workshop production on the mainstage Theatre and Dance season in the spring of my final year. The play propels itself between the California of the 1849 Gold Rush and a contemporary living history gold rush village, and then rockets into a future where the rising Pacific has thrown California underwater. Following a mysterious woman, a new millionaire named Judah, and 12-year-old Cora who's about to have the most adventurous field trip of her life, the play asks its audience – and asked me – what it takes to become an honest animal. From minor to sweeping revisions, this is the first play that I have been connected to from close to its conception through to a full production.

That same second fall, Steven Dietz dared me to direct *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Tennessee Williams's play felt way too big and canonical for me to tackle; I suggested that it would be a great title for me in ten years. After some cajoling and another read, I fell in love with the poetry and epic scope of the story and its characters. My production was on the mainstage Theatre and Dance season my final fall at UT.

Throughout these pursuits, I have been supported by a remarkable cadre of artists and educators, many of whom I'll mention in this document. Steven Dietz broke open most of the things I thought I knew about making plays when he taught directing my first fall in Texas. His craft is beautiful and precise, like a perfectly wound pocket watch, and I'll call him Dietz in this document. Kirk Lynn, now the head of the Playwriting and Directing area, continues to impishly encourage me to get into more trouble than I naturally pursue and has helped me be brave enough to say what I mean; in these pages he'll go by Kirk. Liz Engelman (Liz to you and me) enriched our faculty in my second year. She was the first to name me a dramaturg and taught me how to be more patient

with myself in a kayak in upstate Minnesota. Andrew Carlson (Andrew in this text) is a relentlessly intelligent and passionate artist-scholar who showed me how to treat the theatrical canon as a living thing rather than texts to be revered only from a distance. Andrew has demonstrated by his example and his guidance how to be a teacher and a mentor to undergraduates. Sarah Rasmussen (here known as Sarah), the head of my program, has shown me what it means to be a smart, strong, female director working across this country, and that true rigor demands an equally serious sense of play. My faculty's faith in me, especially in the moments where I was hard pressed to find any in myself, has helped to hold the space I needed in order to make the discoveries I'll unpack in this document.

Space in the Midst of Crisis

In my first semester, sitting in Dietz's directing class, I flinched when I heard other students say, "I think" when they were giving direction to actors. I preferred to ask questions rather than risk giving overly prescriptive instructions. So, when the professional actors brought into class to work on scenes with us said that asking questions wasn't an effective way for a director to communicate with actors, I felt entirely lost. I left class that day feeling like everything I'd ever thought was true had just been pulled out from under me. I doubted all the work I'd ever made, as well as the actors I loved in Chicago, whom I had been proudly speaking to almost exclusively in questions for more than five years. Were they all secretly furious with me? How much better would the work have been if I had been making statements? Had any previous success actually been failure that I hadn't been perceptive enough to see? I didn't know how to move forward. I was afraid that everything I held most dear about making theatre was wrong. I didn't yet understand that this type of crisis is not something to be avoided, but a state of possibility I must continuously seek out and embrace.

While visiting professor Pirronne Yousefzadeh led my directing skills class last fall, she re-introduced me to a Suzuki exercise – Down In Ten – designed to teach actors the value of pursuing the impossible. By asking the actor to execute physically rigorous movement while speaking memorized text with a strong, supported voice, Down in Ten is designed to mirror the inherently terrifying crisis that is engaging body, mind, and voice while on stage. There is always more to be learned and refined in this exercise. Like most simple things, it is far from easy. Also, it is not an end in itself: it is preparation, a fire safety plan for the soul, something you do so you can be present in and through the crisis when it happens for real.

In order to make theatre, we first have to come fully into where and when we are, and that can be a frightening task. The physical rigor of attempting the impossible, while simultaneously working to be present in the moment of crisis initially terrified my actor classmates, but almost immediately deepened their work in class and rehearsal. Juliet Robb, an actor and frequent collaborator, pointed out that Suzuki work also asks us to practice our mental and emotional response to the terror of performance. The crisis creates space, she said, which we can allow to fill with panic, or choose to keep open in anticipation of grace.

In *A Director Prepares*, Anne Bogart names the crisis for the director as the time that she has between stopping the actors' work and getting from the back of the theatre to the stage:

> During the crisis of the walk, something must happen; some insight, some idea. The sensation of this walk to the stage, to the actors, feels like falling into a treacherous abyss. The walk creates a crisis in which innovation must happen, invention must transpire. I create the crisis in rehearsal to get out of my own way. I create despite myself and my limitations, my private terror and my hesitancy. In unbalance and falling lie the potential to create. (86)

The walk happens for me as a director throughout the process of making a play, not just when I'm in the room with actors. The moment I'm presented with a series of possible scenic sketches starts the walk – I must find something to say in response. The walk begins when the marketing department asks for a quote for the press release. The first photos of costume fittings start the walk; so do lighting looks shown for the first time. No matter what expectations or desires I bring into the room, I must walk within the reality that I find there. I must respond authentically in each moment, making sweeping or surgical decisions that carve the course the work will take. The path from impulse to closing night is a series of crises, of walks, each bringing me closer to my authentic

artistic expression. I get to choose what fuels those walks and what kind of space they create in me.

The energy filling me during these walks has often been fear. My body and brain work hard to keep me from the pain of failure. But in order to hold space for something unexpected, delightful, transcendent – the unpredictable, living play – I have to be open to not knowing exactly what comes next. Waiting for an authentic, surprising outcome rather than only allowing what I can predict and control is an act of faith that something will emerge. It requires still, open patience, and the willingness to receive whatever might be on its way in the spirit of a gift.

Sometimes the greatest gift I can receive is the thing I'm most afraid to encounter. Failure is not a dead-end: it is information, fuel, and proof that my curiosity is engaged. Failure is only possible with risk. Graduate school has taught me that I am capable of mischief, delight, and something more compelling than a nicely-made production. In order to make art that excites me, I must propel myself past the paralysis of fear, through the lessons that only failure can teach, and into open, uncertain, insatiable curiosity.

Structure, Ensemble, and Inquiry – Essential Points of Craft

Early in my time at UT, I became obsessed with preparation. I believed that the fear I was feeling throughout my process could be traced to fundamental errors in the way I was getting ready to work. In the last three years, the most essential craft I have cultivated can be broken into three categories: Structure, Ensemble, and Inquiry. I'll examine what I've discovered about each point of craft individually, and then consider how they interact with one another.

STRUCTURE

I have spent ages circling plays, looking for the perfect door through which to enter, afraid I was missing the essential, "correct" key that would perfectly unlock the text and my interpretation of it. Paralyzed by the fear of starting off on the wrong foot, my analysis eventually grasped at the closest thread and pulled randomly from there. Having a reliable set of tools to examine structure helps me see how the individual parts of a written text are working to create a whole. Plot, character, language, rhythm, image – any organizing principle or mechanism that a play employs to move forward is part of its structure. Discerning the Dietz-ian 7 C's of Story – circumstance/context, catalyst, central conflict, complication, crisis, climax, and conclusion/consequence – illuminates structure. The way that time functions – moving forward linearly, running backward, in a circle, alternately building and leading away from a fulcrum moment – these are not sorcery, they are strategy and as such can be studied and used to illuminate how the play is operating.

I've discovered that creating visual representations of structure allow me to more efficiently and confidently begin investigating all these elements. Creating a visual map helps me quickly find a play's particular framework. Using the method of mapping Sarah

first shared with me, called *charting* the play, I track scene shifts and act breaks, location, resonant words, images, music, characters, relationships, time. The number of scenes per act, pages per scene, where the play travels and how often we move all inform story, and reveal keys to rhythm and motion. The "noisiest" parts of the chart, where words or symbols coalesce, are moments that require special investigation. If several elements I'm tracking are all present in one moment, I need to make sure that the moment carries enough weight to land with the audience. I used this method early in my exploration of *Streetcar* to discover that Stanley and Blanche are together on stage for proportionally brief spans of the text. Learning this early on from my chart, I knew I needed to dig into how their interactions escalate and what happens when they are apart to fuel that intensification. Charting the incidents of the "blue piano" and other sounds of the city wafting in from down the street showed me the role that New Orleans itself plays in the narrative progression. Moments where the sounds of the city intrude on Stanley and Blanche's interactions were especially important for me to highlight. Encountering the city as a character vital to the visual and sonic life of the play, and locating my curiosity about the progression of Stanley and Blanche's relationship, simultaneously grounded and cracked open the world I was working to discover.

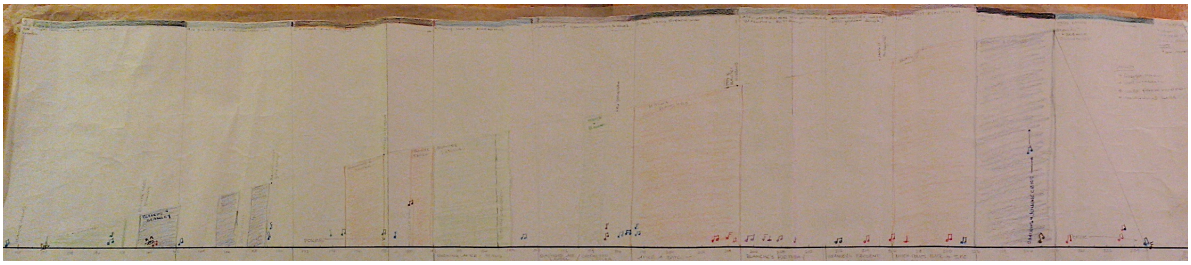

Figure 1: My chart of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Dietz's classes on Time and Story sharpened my ability to find and map the motion that makes up a story. No matter what is at work within a play, events always occur in a specific order and in relationship to time. The placement of a climactic event illuminates a great deal about structure. If the event happens early on, or took place before the curtain rises, you're likely in a fallout, memory, or mystery play. If the audience is waiting for the event to come at the end, you're on a quest or in an adventure story. Laying out the frame and function of the narrative strategies feels like picking up a skeleton key that will get me into at least one door in any play. Time is fact: even bending, interpretive time can be discerned and illustrated. Events happen in a sequence: working to map that order will always give me a place to begin.

To investigate *Lyla School*, Brian and I borrowed Kirk's method of visual mapping and put every page of the text on the wall to help us look at time proportionally. Brian was concerned that the tension of the present day scenes was getting lost during a prolonged stretch in the past.

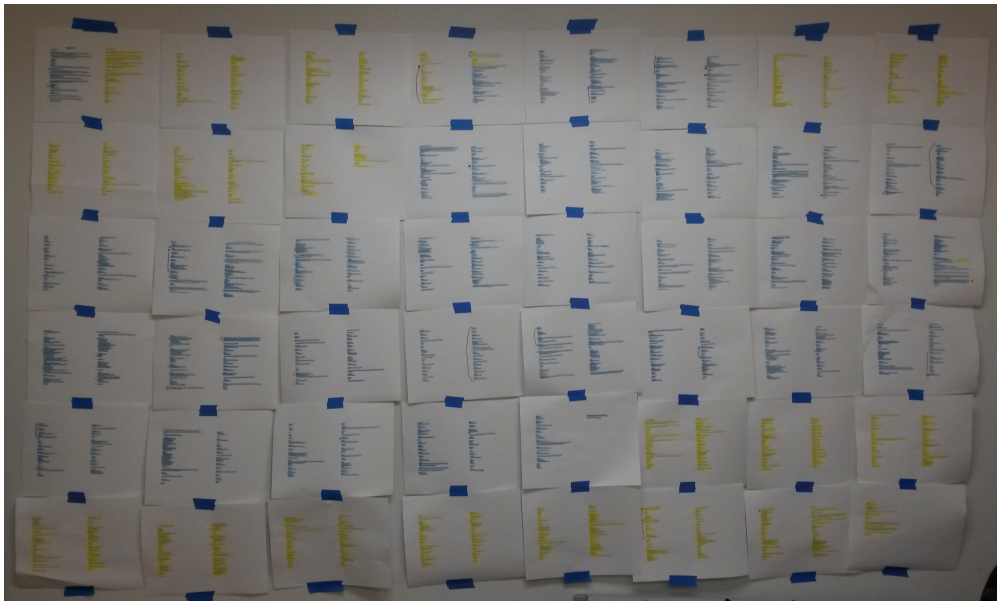

Figure 2: My and Brian's chart of *Lyla School*.

Our chart, with the past marked in blue, and the present in yellow, immediately confirmed Brian's intuitive sense, and even offered a visual suggestion of where the new scene might live. Brian noted where it would be aesthetically pleasing to see more yellow on the wall – and we quickly discovered that in terms of story trajectory that was where we most needed a reminder of the present.

Knowing that I can count on dramaturgical structure and a menu of visual options helps quell my fear that some plays are impenetrable fortresses. Once I've built my own understanding, part of my job is to craft a journey of discovery for my collaborators. As the director, I get to establish a great deal about the structure through which I rehearse a play. By purposefully crafting the progression of rehearsals, I can design each process according to a play's specific needs.

A rehearsal process can have a structural arc as rich as the one embedded in the play it's making. What kind of inciting incident do I want for this process? Is the rising action more about story clarity or building the world we're going to inhabit? Choosing a point of no return – where discovery has to happen within the container of refining the work we have – has to be specific to every production. I don't believe that my plays are "done" on opening night, so the falling action of my rehearsal process must also serve as a launch. Just like the consequence of one story is the given circumstance of a new one, the process I lead must empower the actors and crew to continue exploring within given parameters, and with each new audience. In order to get there, the process I author has to be just as intentionally crafted as the words the playwright has written.

In structuring a rehearsal progression, I must consider why I'm including each phase of the process, and how I will use that section of time. Sometimes the standard rehearsal sequence – first read, tablework, blocking, refining, tech, preview, opening – works well. Other times, the text, the ensemble assembled to encounter it, or the external

constraints of time or space are ill-served by this order of operations. Regardless, considered investigation of what is needed and how best to meet those needs is the key to creating a responsive, agile process.

The dangers of not questioning the commonly accepted sequence became clear my second year when I directed the first bilingual production of *Salt and Pepper* by José Cruz Gonzalez, produced in collaboration with Austin's ZACH theatre. After our first rehearsal, my cast and I took our places around the table so we could talk about the story and our personal resonances with the play. Our discussions were sometimes fruitful, but often they became reductive or even divisive. My cast was exclusively Latino/a; the design team and producers were all white. Despite my best intentions, my fear of saying the wrong thing exacerbated a lack of clear goals for our tablework. My fear of my own authority caused me to stick to the conventional sequence of a rehearsal process, without thinking deeply about what I wanted each phase, especially talking around the table, to accomplish. As a result, I stumbled into delicate conversations about race, class, and the difficult history of our state and our country, voicing opinions when I would have done well to simply listen. Having a clear idea of what I wanted to discover could have helped me better lead the inquiry into this story.

Over a year later, preparing for *Enter A Woman*, I took my rehearsal schedule into a conversation with Dietz, as I sensed that something wasn't yet right with the progression I had planned, even though it looked "correct." He helped me see that with a few tweaks, I could make the schedule feel more like the play. Making a wild, epic piece whose text was still evolving required a rehearsal schedule that made room for that flux by going slow. I applied this notion to our design process as well, taking this opportunity to more deeply examine the flexibility ideally found at the core of making new work.

Not long before rehearsals began, dramaturgical mastermind Lue Douthit from Oregon Shakespeare Festival visited Sarah's directing class. She described her dream schedule for the design process of new plays. The actors, director, and playwright would create the physical shape of the play first, before any designs were finalized, so that the container of the play could be made in response to the first draft of embodied text. This notion is counter to the received knowledge within the American theatre, where the design is often finished and built long before actors get on their feet. However, we had an unusual level of flexibility with *Enter A Woman*, which allowed us to be riskier than normal. I also had an overbooked design team, who had yet to show me final renderings or models. I decided to seize this opportunity to test Lue's vision. The designers paused their work, and Diana, the actors, and I spent our first week of rehearsal roughly sketching the entire play.

Making that first physical draft taught us that our original plan for an alley configuration was not what the play wanted. Our agile team switched to a deep proscenium, which was a more appropriate container for the presentational, Brechtian sensibility of the text. As rehearsals progressed and we moved into our lightning-fast tech process, I continued to give myself the gift of, as Sarah advised, going slow to go fast. Even though we had no full run with tech before our invited dress, I had been clear and purposeful enough in our scene work in rehearsal and the integration of design elements in tech that our first show was remarkably solid. If I had succumbed to my fear and moved through the process "correctly," I would have missed an opportunity to experiment with structure, and likely damaged my show to boot. Forcing the designs to be finished before we became fully acquainted with the motion of the play would have burdened the production with a less than ideal physical container. A run before we were

ready would actually have been more harmful than waiting a little while longer to see the whole thing come together.

Deepening my understanding of how structural elements work and how to locate them has given me a set of tiny crowbars with which I believe I can crack open any play. Similarly, interrogating and, when necessary, adjusting the logistical system of rehearsal allows me to use my time more wisely. Being mindful, flexible, and strategic with these structures enables me to be specific and thoughtful about how I'm making meaning for my collaborators and myself. The systems themselves aren't enough, though. Without collaborators, any structure is just an empty frame.

ENSEMBLE

Built into my Air Force brat DNA is a longing for home, which is what a cohesive artistic ensemble always feels like to me. Whether using Viewpoints to create shared physical vocabulary, assigning actors dramaturgical research projects to ensure everyone's investment in world-building, or constructing the set together, shared understanding and purpose has always been paramount in my work. Good ensembles become tiny, temporary families. Nothing fills me with pride like a well-cast play in a rehearsal room buoyant with the joy of collaborators taking pleasure in each other's company.

This work begins when I'm assembling my team. The casting process has always been a relatively fearless place for me. Here, I have less trouble listening to my impulses. It is easy for me to be patient with actors, to see potential in them that transcends a poor choice of monologue or nerve-induced stumbles in a cold reading. Perhaps the potential of auditions is what I love most about them. In the time before the violent articulation of finalizing a cast, everything is possible. Patience can often make all the difference in

casting, especially if a role has never been embodied before. For *Lyla School*, Brian and I waited especially far past our comfort zones to cast Ahmed, one of the play's central characters. We were rewarded with a generous, capable actor who exceeded both of our expectations.

Once my team is assembled, my desire to maintain that joyful environment can get me into trouble. Just as the possibility for failure proves that I'm taking authentic risks, dissent among collaborators can mean that we've each invested in the process and in each other. There is a way to disagree that demonstrates devotion. I have often been afraid that if people disagree, I haven't properly created ensemble, which I have feared as the ultimate failure.

During the last rehearsals of *Streetcar*, I was consistently told that the actors would jump over the cliff of the play *for me* because of the trust that I'd built in the rehearsal room. That trust has always been of the utmost importance. In fact, I believe I've stopped short of pushing actors to more deeply interrogate their work in an effort to protect that sense of safety. But why am I building ensembles that would jump over cliffs if we're only going to stand a safe distance from the edge? I suspect I have been protecting myself as much as – or more than – I'm protecting my actors. I needed to maintain a nice environment so that the actors would like working on the play, and – ultimately – so that they would like working with me. My over-concern with what the actors think of me has let me be too gentle, too easily satisfied, too *nice*.

There is a difference between a rehearsal process that is nice and one that is kind. Niceness lives on the surface. It is conflict-averse, most concerned with making sure that everyone in the room gets along. A kind rehearsal process is still grounded in a desire for a positive shared journey, but seeks a more honest and authentic connection. A kind process doesn't avoid the difficult conversations. It asks for more from everyone in the

room. Kindness says hard truths – when the moment doesn't work, when the story isn't clear, when the favorite piece of staging has to go to serve the whole. It is driven by curiosity and commitment. It pries open the door to a stronger temporary family than niceness could ever know. Creating a kind, safe rehearsal room in order to make art that is reckless requires me to step into each rehearsal with a spirit of exploration that flies above my own fear. Trusting that empathy and concern for my collaborators' wellbeing will always be at the core of my process, I can more fearlessly lead each cast and crew.

The connections created among the four-actor ensemble of *Lyla School* were what enabled me to use our just over two-week process to stage a full production. My original plan was to present the play in a mixture of on-book and memorized scenes. It became apparent, though, that I was trying to be nice to the actors by not asking them to quickly internalize a whole, still-changing play. Brian's text requires a rhythmic precision that is extremely challenging to achieve on-book. It turned out that my original plan wasn't kind to anyone. Asking the actors to get all the text into their brains and bodies, while initially a lot more work, was both right and kind – it set them and the production up for success much more effectively than the "easier" choice would have. These actors instantly invested in one another and the play. They became a nimble, responsive team, able to tackle the challenges of this emotionally complex, textually fluid, precisely tuned play.

With these lessons fresh in my mind, I showed kindness in my process for *Enter A Woman* through high expectations and exacting rigor that pushed the actors, the play, and me past all our comfortable stops. Rather than taking such overt care to ensure everyone felt safe and valued, I experimented with assuming that environment was already in place to see if these elements were as inherent in my work as I suspected. I was delighted by the actors' response: they were far hungrier to be challenged than I had anticipated, and felt safe enough to run toward risk. The rehearsal room still felt like one I had made, but

this time, we didn't keep such a safe distance from the edge of the cliff. Diana and I spent four hours one morning on one two-character scene with actors who were struggling with the tone and style of this non-naturalistic play. We worked relentlessly, crafting each beat with intense precision. I believe an earlier version of myself would have been incapable of this. It didn't feel nice in the moment, but it would have been cruel to send the actors into performance without the specificity the scene and style required. Pushing them past where they knew to go was the kindest gift we could give them – and helping me see how to express care for my ensemble through that textual and physical rigor was a great gift that Diana gave to me.

Being in the same room, breathing the same air, sharing an experience – these are the things that are most thrilling to me about creating a live theatrical event. My collaborators help me to interrogate, clarify, and propel my own perceptions of the play. Clarifying the difference between niceness, which is more about me, and kindness, which puts the play at the heart of the process, I've created stronger work that makes better use of the camaraderie that first brought me into the theatre. However, a feeling of family alone is not enough. Making plays that skate on the surface is never satisfying to me, so I must cultivate and employ the tools of dramaturgical inquiry.

INQUIRY

My approach to directing is grounded in my love of dramaturgy, which puts deep inquiry, intense curiosity, and a defined sense of purpose in the center of the creative act. Dramaturgy is what allows me to look honestly and boldly at the world in which I'm making work, and asks me to decide how I wish to speak to, for, or against our present moment. Dramaturgy happens when curious analysis and joyful rigor combine. How language, character, theme, time, and image are working in a text, and the investigation

of each of these layers of the text individually, reveal the cogs of the play's machine. Inquiry is a living, evolving element in any production. It is not solely question-and-answer time at the beginning of the rehearsal process. True, it is part of how my ensemble and I crack open a play in our initial approach, but inquiry is also how we deepen and refine our investigation, and how I ensure clarity, precision, and purpose in what we offer to an audience.

My understanding of inquiry is tied to my belief in structure. The first layer of my understanding can come from myriad structural tools, but once I've found my first "in," the other avenues of questioning arise to take me deeper and deeper into the world of the play. In her beautiful essay, "Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play," Elinor Fuchs posits that each play is its own complete world, with its own rules of engagement and laws of physics. Each planet is best explored on its own terms (6). No wonder, then, that encountering a new play can be as frightening a proposition as it is a thrilling one. Going to any unfamiliar place for the first time requires a leap of faith. Once I know how the trains work, where the grocery store is, and where my morning coffee's coming from, I can find my way around most new places with ease – but I need to get a few systems in place before I feel comfortable really exploring.

My tools of dramaturgical inquiry are like Google Maps, GPS, and Yelp for each small planet I encounter. They help me orient myself, find tips on which corners of the landscape I should continue to explore, and help reorient me if I start to wander off the trail. Being afraid of getting lost, of taking the "wrong" path, or missing a key element of the text are barriers to deep inquiry: that kind of fear jams the signals and makes sure no messages get through at all. Using craft as my compass points helps me articulate and hold true to purpose. Purpose is my True North, and will always bring me home.

For *A Streetcar Named Desire*, I wanted to collaborate as closely as possible with Tennessee Williams and his original text. The first staging and film adaptation cast long shadows over this play, and it was important to me that we strip away as many preconceptions as possible. Treating this classic text as if it were a new play was my True North for this production. I discovered that the Dramatists Play Service edition of the script reflects that canonical first production, which included over 100 text changes made at director Elia Kazan's suggestion. After learning this, I made sure that our production text was the New Directions edition since that is the closest we have in published form to a final draft from Williams. Additionally, the Harry Ransom Center on UT's campus has an impressive collection of Tennessee Williams's papers. With Andrew's support and insight on where to begin my research, I used that archive in my initial approach to the play. Investigating early drafts as well as the context of our country when the play was written, I worked to make Tennessee a collaborator even if he couldn't be physically present in the room.

At our first design meeting, I asked the designers to imagine our nightmare production. We thought about all the tactile elements, imagining the worst possible way we could bring them to life. We agreed that a production that simply satisfied the stereotypes and assumptions that have grown around this play as it has been embedded in our cultural consciousness would be a failure. It was remarkable how quickly and easily we found consensus around what our productions was *not*. In the past I had been afraid to entertain this kind of starting point – I thought that invoking the worst imaginable production would somehow call it into being. Overtly stating what we knew the play was not propelled us with more force toward what we wanted it to be. Together, we cracked open the play and gave ourselves permission to be less precious with a classic text. We used playfulness as our first tool of inquiry.

My own inquiry had consistently brought me back to the idea of permeability. From the thinness of the walls, to the meddling of the neighbors, to the hold that Blanche keeps on her conception of self, boundaries are not hard and fast in this world. It felt essential that our physical container and our understanding of how the play moved embrace this permeability. I wanted to communicate this notion in a way that was precise, but not prescriptive, something that would inspire inquiry in my designers rather than their simple execution of my pre-ordained vision. I found an image that felt intuitively like the play. Color, texture, motion: everything about this image felt like the production I wanted to create.

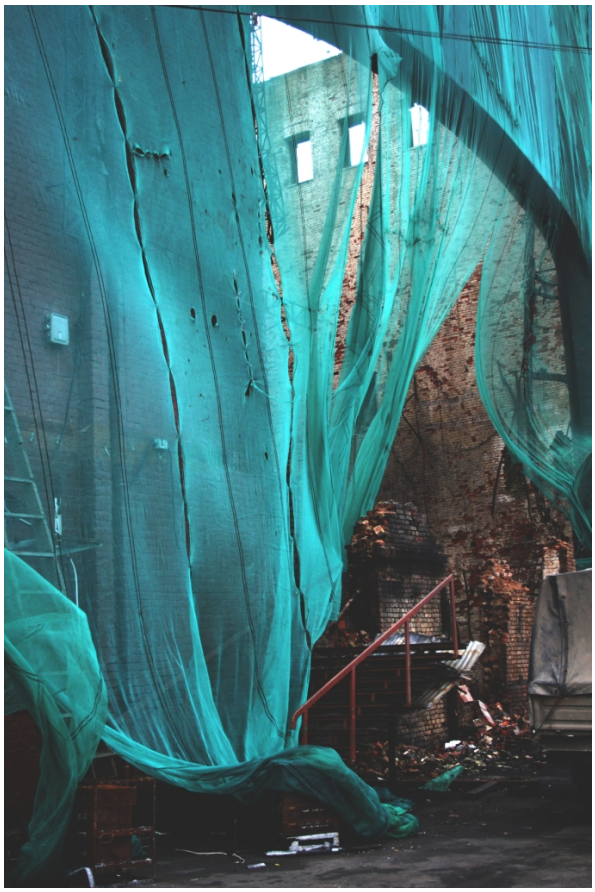

Figure 3: My initial inspirational image for *Streetcar*

By establishing a precise springboard that could open rather than close the continued investigation of the team, we began to build our shared vocabulary. Once we set a course together in that first meeting, we moved forward at a remarkable pace because we were all grounded in a shared understanding of what we were after and why. The resulting design was beautiful and the perfect container for our production. Rather than prioritize the voices of my collaborators to the exclusion of my own, or coming in with too many specific decisions already made, I led a truly collaborative process. It was open to discovery, fueled by joyful inquiry, and launched by my directorial vision.

Figure 4: Teena Sauvola's set for *Streetcar* under Andrew Carson's lights.

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Reflecting on the skills of Structure, Ensemble, and Inquiry that help me make a play proves that I have indeed gained the craft that I was after when I came to Austin. But

investigating and implementing them in isolation, something is still missing. Putting these areas of concern next to each other, even thinking about them in a sequence, I still feel unsatisfied.

When three actors are on stage, there's a strange gravitational pull that brings them next to each other in a line. The picture is flat, static, and deadly if it's not mindfully made. To create tension, enable dynamic flow, and improve sightlines, I've learned the power of triangles. In former UT professor Francis Hodge's seminal book *Play Directing*, there's no other option: if you have three or more actors on stage, he says, they go in a triangle every time (105). A series of diagrams in his text demonstrates how to cover the optimal amount of distance to give your triangles the most impact.

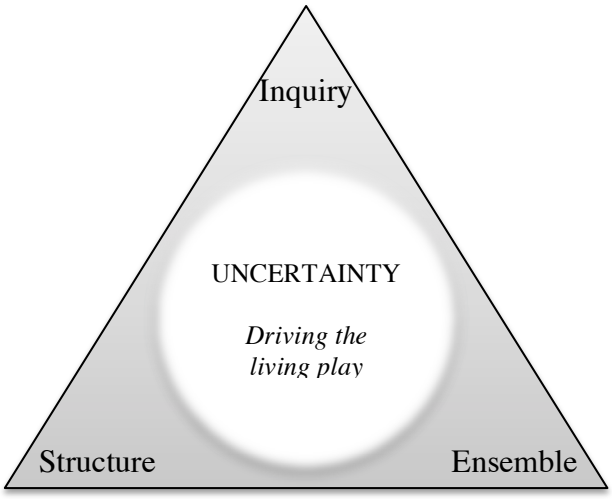

Figure 5: The triangle created by these three points of craft.

Rather than points in isolation or stops on a straight line, Structure, Ensemble, and Inquiry must each be in direct conversation with the other two. Like a dynamic moment of staging, these three points must form a triangle. In addition to creating powerful diagonals, this strong, flexible shape leaves space in its center. This space mirrors the space I must also keep open in the middle of myself so that the unexpected, unknowable

event that is the living play – real humans pursuing real needs in real time, regardless of the style or content of the piece – can come to life.

Fear and the specter of failure can short-circuit my process. Even after I recognized the essential usefulness of these three points, my fear wasn't solved or even mitigated by that knowledge alone. There was something I wasn't yet able to see about how they had to work with one another, and what it truly meant to put them, as a unified shape, into motion.

Connecting the Dots | Creating the Triangle

When I started graduate school, I was hungry for foolproof craft that would allow me to reliably solve for X in every process. These tools would stem the terror that I didn't know, see, feel, or think enough to create compelling art. The past three years have taught me that in fact I don't desire a process set in stone. The signature I wish to write across my work adapts to each piece's purpose, how I am engaging it, and how it is engaging me. Like the plays I love and the craft I've learned, my process feeds on motion, exists and reinvents itself in real time, and is illuminated by my three guiding principles. Structure, Ensemble, and Inquiry are diagnostic as well as preparatory tools that must be constantly fed, calibrated, and recalibrated in relationship to one another in order to be effective. Using this triangle, I can assess each challenge as it arises, moving from the instinctual impulse that something isn't working to an understanding of which tool might unlock the potential of the moment.

Working with Gabby on *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens*, I didn't have my points of craft in place, let alone the ability to negotiate them all at the same time. I believed that my job as a director of a first production was to serve the playwright by staging the play as it was in her head. I didn't yet know that is impossible, or what kind of questions to ask her about the play, or how to talk with her about setting goals for our specific production. I was just eager to please a playwright I admired, who also intimidated me. So, without claiming my artistic autonomy, I was a pushover in the *Kittens* room. I deferred to Gabby on almost every point. Even so, I still never felt like I was getting it right. This killed my confidence and diluted my approach, but I didn't find a successful way to talk to Gabby about it until opening night. Even then, shouting about how we liked each other and that maybe next time we'd work together better might not really

count as having that conversation – but the shouting was definitely a step up from my paralyzed compliance.

If Gabby and I had spent more time together in the early phases of our process, we could have anticipated and avoided many of our struggles. If we had examined the structure and themes of the play together and talked about our shared goals for the production, we could have established guiding principles for our work. Is this an exploratory workshop, a showcase, or a world premiere? How are we going to work together in the room with actors and designers to move toward our goals? The uncertainty of this process was uncontrolled, and I allowed panic to flood in until there was very little space left for discovery.

In order for me to contribute to the development of new work, it is essential that I create a clear, personal interpretation of the written text. This is not to say that my ideas must be finished and impermeable when I first enter a collaborative process, especially if the playwright will be a partner in that work. However, without establishing my own True North, it is easy for me to measure my success by the pleasure of the playwright. Pausing the first rush of a new collaboration to talk about boundaries and expectations feels unromantic. If it's "meant to be," shouldn't we be able to fluidly make it up as we go along? Like any relationship, though, clear expectations are a better predictor of success than all the intuitive synergy in the world. Once those are in place, we can get to the heart of the work, moving past what is polite, nice, and easy. I can best serve the play and its author by using Structure, Ensemble, and Inquiry to make the text my own.

With *'ratio*, there was no way for me to make anything at all without finding a way to trust myself and start making big marks on the canvas of the play. This piece and our physically driven development process were like nothing I'd experienced before. Feeling that I had no prior points of reference to rely on helped me think past my

assumptions about what rehearsal, collaboration, and new play development look like. This process required a level of invention that helped me make major strides in discovering and claiming my directorial voice.

David and Bill gave me carte blanche to create a physical text. When our weeklong workshop began in the fall, I dove in, leading generative physical exercises that interrogated character and sought to build the larger world of the play. The trust that David, Bill, and I invested in each other allowed me to take bigger risks in that room than I had ever dared before. I took care with the ensemble of brave, primarily undergraduate UT actors we had assembled, but I was not shy with them or precious with the text we made. As the TA for Kirk's Devising course that semester, I had seen how asking actors to perform impossible tasks, especially as a full group, with impish insistence on perfection could simultaneously build ensemble and generate compelling moments of performance. I stole his exercises whole and worked to harness that same glee in our rehearsals.

The piece was still evolving, but the parameters for the workshop were clear. Since I had never done anything quite like this before, I was more rigorous in my preparation of schedule and goals. I was also more forgiving of myself when something didn't go according to plan. I was able to register that information, but then quickly shift my focus toward what came next. This was fueled by the process's emphasis on inquiry: David and Bill had no idea what a physical text made from their words and images would look like, and their openness to and trust of my experimentation emboldened me to let my hunches and curiosity lead us through the week. Exercises sometimes failed magnificently, and for the first time I felt that failure as exhilarating forward momentum. I gave myself the freedom to make drafts just as Bill and David had been creating draft

after draft of their own for months. Rather than seeking to please the authors, I worked toward my own delight, discovering my singular text built from and in response to theirs.

In the spring, when we presented *'ratio* as part of UTNT, I encountered the audience and guest artist feedback with that same openness. After three weeks of rehearsal, which included adding in a media text of video and old-school overhead projected images along with sound, music, and a karaoke number, the chaos of this conglomeration made sense to our team. However, not all of our audience climbed on board the ride. Because the core purpose at the heart of this project was aggressive experimentation and discovery, I received this feedback as useful information where a previous incarnation of me might have felt it as shame-triggering failure. The feedback sent me back into the rehearsal room in the week between presentations excited to take what we'd made and refine our work. I was eager to continue the experiment.

At the time we finished *'ratio*, I couldn't articulate what about it had felt so important to my development as an artist. Part of it was the friendship and collaborative synchronicity I'd found in David Turkel, an artist who lives opposite me on the wheel of artistic impulse. We serve as complimentary colors to one another's aesthetics, and working with him has expanded my understanding of and sharpened my convictions about what theatre is for. But it wasn't just my connection with Turkel that made *'ratio* so significant. I think that this process provided my first glimpse of a balanced triangle of Structure, Ensemble, and Inquiry and how that balance can turn the unpredictable, even when it first comes as failure, into powerful energy rather than paralyzing fear.

Finding balance is the opposite of staying still. I have to find and engage my core and then adjust, readjust, check in with my surroundings and adjust again in order to maintain what looks like stillness, control, and calm. To move from collaborative fluke to system of engagement, I had to live a little longer in the space of imbalance.

With *Streetcar*, my concern with the experience of the ensemble as a whole and my delight in dramaturgical inquiry pulled my triangle out of balance. As a result, structure got short shrift in this process. We spent a lot of time around the table, discussing the context of 1947 New Orleans and parallels we saw in our lives today, as well as the ins and outs of Williams's characters and story points. At times, I lost sight of the personal work my principal characters needed, based in the simple dramatic action of objectives and obstacles rather than heady discourse on the play's themes. Tablework isn't where we figure out what we're going to do so that when we get up on our feet everything is already decided. As Andrew and Dietz have both reminded me, we sit around the table in order to find just enough clarity to have a unified sense of purpose and momentum. With *Streetcar,* my desire for an egalitarian – read "nice" – process, allowed discussions to cross boundaries that ultimately created more challenges than they solved. It can be fun to get into a dramaturgical debate that attempts to "solve" Blanche or Stanley, or reduce him or her to a literary analysis – she's just crazy; he's just a rapist. But what's actually more interesting – and more difficult – is to keep as much in play for as long as possible and allow actors to wait until they're up on their feet to fully discover their emotional paths through the play. Finding the doubt, the complication, continuing to open the story – this is the good, hard work of rehearsal. The play isn't alive around the table. It can't be. We have to get on our feet before we can meet it. With so much time spent working to ensure that we were going to move forward as one unit, I didn't leave adequate time to work moment to moment while looking at that rattletrap *Streetcar* and its winding journey as a whole.

Immediately following *Streetcar*, I was given the opportunity to recalibrate these triangulated proportions. With the structure of time as compressed as it was for *Lyla School*, it was vital that a strong ensemble and clear sense of inquiry help bring my work

into balance. Our short process demanded I be economical and strategic. It was essential that I deliver the vital center of each note, rather than worrying too much about nice delivery systems. Brian is incredibly smart and precisely insightful. His trust is not gentle, but once earned is an engine of innovative creativity. The gift of Brian's defiant trust – even when I felt that I had broken it with my "wrong" drafts of his play, spurred me to keep making drafts, making big decisions, and going slowly so that later in the process we'd be able to fly fast. The crucible of our short process forced me to stop fretting about whether or not I could work this deeply this efficiently. Instead, it insisted I find the balance that proved that I could.

My initial process of writing this thesis, articulating these points of craft, and discovering the dynamic triangle they must form ran parallel to rehearsals for *Enter A Woman*. That process was not perfect, but finding balance isn't about arriving at one unchanging solution and sticking the landing on the first, tenth, or hundredth try. Having these points of craft to watch for allowed me to more quickly and decisively diagnose troubles in rehearsal, contribute dramaturgically to Diana's continued development of the words, and work toward a more rigorous, adventurous rehearsal room. They also helped me to see moments of failure as fuel cells boosting us closer to the show I meant to make. I was proud of *Enter A Woman* in much the same way that I was proud of *'ratio*. The difference between these processes is in my own awareness and intention. What felt like a happy, lucky accident at the mid-point of my grad school career has transformed into a repeatable, reliable methodology. I can't cut and paste the process of *Enter A Woman* onto my next project, but that's the whole point. Just like I intuitively did for *'ratio*, I intentionally questioned the best practice process and adjusted it to suit *Enter A Woman*'s needs. I used Structure, Ensemble, and Inquiry as preparatory and diagnostic tools. I

made my version of Diana's play, which was both loyal to the text she wrote, and undisputedly mine.

Over the past three years, I have developed the craft-driven process I came to graduate school to find. It is more complicated than I thought it was supposed to be, offers me no simplistic solutions, and will never really be finished. Process doesn't eradicate uncertainty or neutralize fear; rather, it embraces both. The moments of transcendence that I'm after in my work can't come from a checklist. There's no space within a straight line for surprise, and while my anxious brain wants to close the gaps, my intuitive core has learned the importance of holding space for surprise as long and as wide as I can. It is only from deep inside that space that something transcendent can emerge.

Conclusion: Holding Space for Grace

In the end, I cannot control when or if the surprising, miraculous moment of the living play, the cohesive production family, the warm hearth of an artistic home will arrive. The theatre is a place we can go to sit together and try to figure out what it means to be alive by grappling with how to best spend the precious time we've been given. When we're lucky, we get a hint. These glimpses of grace are what I've been looking for all along.

The moment that gives me goose bumps, or fills my eyes with tears and my heart with longing – that's grace to me. Grace appears in the actor who loses his line as he makes a new discovery, and the one who finds, at last, the friction that makes a scene come alive. Grace lives in the design meeting when the play's necessary container suddenly comes into focus. It blooms between members of the audience in shared laughter or surprise. With my best collaborators, during the run where we really nail it – these moments are what I'm always working to find.

On the first day of rehearsal, my charge for *Enter A Woman* fell flat because I was afraid. Grace doesn't always look the way I want it to. My failure that day – my worst-case scenario made manifest – did not destroy me where I stood. It was, instead, the culminating event I needed most, and the one I have been trying most of my life to avoid. In finally feeling and facing that fear, I found the energy, courage, and space that fueled the passionate articulation of my process to my students three days later. Grace shows up as synchronicity, too.

The theatre I love does not offer easy answers to difficult questions, but it will give me space to consider where and how I belong. I do not fully understand how our rituals work, how transcendence appears from the unknown, but I know that it does. I come to the theatre when I am hungry, empty, and lost. I keep coming back because the

theatre has fed me, filled me, and showed me how to get home. Each process I embark upon is a series of walks. My life in this art form is a series of walks. There is no map, no checklist, no foolproof path. The best I can do is take a deep breath, embrace the energy in my fear, and keep putting one foot in front of the other.

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